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Life in Nazi Germany

I was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1928. My mother was a German native, but my father was born in a part of Austria which was annexed to Poland after World War I. Although he had served in the Austrian army, and his name was definitely a German one, he was given Polish citizenship — much to his dismay.

German law requires children and grandchildren ad infinitum to take the nationality of the their male ancestor, so I was a Polish citizen too. This became significant after Hitler came to power in 1933.

My family was Jewish. The Nazi government placed many restrictions on the Jews. But somehow foreign Jews were supposedly not subject to these restrictions. Jews were barred from walking on certain streets in Berlin, one of which was Kurfuerstendamm, where my orthodontist was located. I was permitted to visit his office, but neither my mother nor my grandmother could accompany me. My fright on walking there was intense each time, knowing very well that the authorities could do whatever they wanted with Jews they encountered.

Similarly, I was given a ticket to go to a circus performance where there was a sign at the entrance reading "Keine Juden," (no Jews). Again, I was alone. Shortly after the performance began, someone near me dropped an umbrella, which made a loud clatter falling down the bleacher area where I was sitting. All eyes turned towards me, or so I thought. I shook with terror. The circus performance did not penetrate my mind.

As the world now knows, Kristallnacht occurred on the night of November 9th, 1938. I was not living with my mother because, being a single working mom, she could not care for me. I lived in a group home a few blocks from her apartment. We children had gone to sleep as usual that evening. The housemother later woke us up and told us all to get dressed, even with coats, hats and gloves. We were to sit silently on our beds, in the dark. She was sobbing. We could hear much noise outside of shouting, screaming, bashing and running, and could see the light from one or more fires. We sat for what seemed a long time. Our housemother fully expected the Nazis to crash into the

apartment. Fortunately, they didn't, and eventually we were permitted to undress again and go back to sleep.

Late one afternoon a telegram was delivered for me. I ran with it to my mother's. It ordered me to appear at the Police Station the following morning at 8 a.m. My mother said she would go in my place. When she did, she was told that I, a Polish Jew, must leave the country within ten days.

My tenth birthday occurred shortly before I left. My mother planned a big party both to celebrate my birthday, and as a farewell party. After living away from my mother for as long as I could remember, I had just moved in with her a couple of days before. We were both in the kitchen on Friday afternoon the day before the party, and the radio was on. Suddenly, we heard an announcement: No Jews would be allowed on the streets on the following day. The only person who could come to my "party" was a friend of my mother's, Tante (aunt) Dora as she was known to me. She was a non-Jew married to a Jewish man who had already been taken away earlier that year. She had two sons. The younger one, Dagobert, was about my age, and we usually played together while our mothers visited. Dagobert's older brother was taken away also. Dagobert was taken away after I left Berlin.Tante Dora was the only one in the family to survive the war as she was not Jewish.

The Kindertransport

I left Berlin on December 14th, 1938. My mother and stepfather took me to the railway station in a taxi early in the morning. The scene in the station waiting room was a very emotional one. The parents were saying goodbye to their children, some as young as toddlers, not knowing what was to happen to them, or, indeed, to themselves. The parents told their children they would be joining them later, but 90% of the Kindertransport children never saw their parents again. The Kindertransport was the operation that took nearly 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children to England from December, 1938 until the war broke out on September 3rd, 1939.

The train was a chartered one, with I don't know how many hundreds of children on board. Two adults were assigned to supervise us. We saw them only briefly. I was the oldest in my compartment, and took a mothering role in comforting the others who were, of course, very upset at leaving home and family. Having lived away from my mother all those years, I was not as upset as the others. After a

while I took out a recorder I had been permitted to take with me, and played songs for the others to sing. It helped.

As we neared the Dutch border a uniformed customs official came into our compartment and ordered us to open our suitcases. The then wildly threw their contents around, upsetting the children all over again. After we had collectively repacked the suitcases, I again played songs on my recorder to calm everyone's nerves once again.

We reached the Hook of Holland after dark that evening and boarded an overnight ferry to England. After breakfast the next morning we were lined up on deck. Two Bobbies (English policemen) walked by, frightening us no end. From our experience in Germany, uniformed men were to be feared. Of course they did us no harm, and we boarded buses that took us to a camp at a place called Dovercourt. It was a summer vacation camp, and consisted of unheated cabins and a large marquee where we gathered for meals and activities. We learned that this was the coldest winter England had experienced in fifty years. There were already many children there from a previous transport.

The first evening the BBC was there for a live broadcast. I couldn't understand English at the time, but I believe it must have contained an appeal for listeners to take us into their homes. I became sick the next morning, I believe with the flu, and was taken to the "hospital" hut. It contained four beds like the others, but also had a small electric floor heater. After I had been there for I don't know how long, I was finally instructed to put on lots of clothes and pack everything else, as I was going on another journey.

After a train trip that took most of the day, the few of us from the camp who were on the train got off at Hull, a port city in Yorkshire on the north east coast of the country. We all wore identifying tags and were marched around in a circle while our prospective foster parents checked the tags for the child assigned to them. I was taken by a couple who took me to their home in a car.

Neither of my foster parents spoke German, and adjustment was quite difficult. Not only could we not understand each other's conversation, but the customs were different. For instance, "good" children didn't hide their hands on the laps when sitting at a table; the hands were to rest at the edge of the table. When I took pains to be on my best behavior and put my hands on the table, I got slapped because that was considered unacceptable. They had no children of their own and had no idea how to deal with me.

I attended a two-room schoolhouse. I was armed with a German-English dictionary. At the beginning of each day the teacher would write down a list of words for me to translate, and I would retreat to a desk at the back of the room to look for the translation in the dictionary. All the children knew I came from Germany, and called me "Nazi," a word I understood all too well. None of the children wanted to make friends with me. Looking back at that period, I've wondered why the teacher didn't make an attempt to explain my situation. It's possible she didn't understand it any more than her students did.

During the war, air raid sirens would go off frequently and the alerts would last a long time. We spent the time putting jigsaw puzzles together. My foster father had built a dugout in the center of the garden lawn, and the entire family would troop down to it when the sirens sounded. Then gradually the sirens were more or less ignored, and we'd stay in the house with its windows blacked out. Later, the dugout became my bedroom when a friend of the family was bombed out of his house and he was given what had been my room.

One night an incendiary bomb actually bounced off the roof of the dugout, but fortunately it burned itself out harmlessly in the garden.

Later, I was sent to live in a hostel for refugee girls which was in an area less subject to bombing raids.

Off to the U.S.

My mother and step father left Germany for the United States in June, 1941, while I was in England. There was no civilian ocean travel from England during the war, and besides, my parents were just getting settled in New York at the time. It was hard for them, as it was for other refugees who managed to escape from the Nazi countries. They were permitted to only take out what they could carry, plus $4 each in cash. They were helped, as were other refugees, by a Jewish organization that found them an apartment, helped them get (menial) jobs, and assisted them in getting furniture from the Salvation Army.

My mother sent me ship tickets from England to New York in 1946. I was very resentful that she had not asked whether I even wanted to join her in New York. I was seventeen years old at the time, and had no desire to go to the U.S. My

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impressions of the States were formed by the rash behavior of the GIs stationed in England, and the Hollywood movies, neither of which appealed to me.

No sooner had I landed in New York than I plotted how to get back to England. I decided I would be a hospital stewardess on a transatlantic liner. There were two nurses with that title on board the ship I had come on. I walked into Montefiori Hospital in the Bronx a day or two after my arrival and asked to be trained as a nurse. The first (and only) question I was asked by the nursing supervisor was whether I had a high school diploma. The answer was no. To get a secondary education in England students had to pass an "elevenses" exam, which was given at eleven years old. My foster mother told me I wouldn't pass that exam (even though I knew English well by then), so there was no point in my taking it. So I left school at age fourteen, which was the common leaving age for those who didn't go on to high school. Secondary education had to be paid for, which I presume was the reason I was not allowed to take the qualifying test.

I enrolled in evening classes at Roosevelt High School. I completed all required course work in three and a half years, and even got an award at the graduation ceremony for having the best average grade. I don't know if I actually did have the best average grade (I hadn't heard of grade point averages at the time), but I think the teachers were impressed that I worked for my high school diploma entirely in evening classes and wanted to recognize me in some way. I was quite surprised that I could actually earn a high school diploma, let alone a special award, as my foster mother had considered me so incompetent.

During that period I had appendicitis. My stay in the hospital convinced me that I didn't want to become a nurse after all. I had not considered going on to college; after all, I was far too incompetent. But my employer, the mother of the children I babysat for, urged me to take the qualifying exam, which I did and actually passed! I applied to City College, but was rejected on the basis that I was female, and females could only enter the college's School of Education, which I didn't want to do. I went to Hunter College, a girl's college, instead. It was one of the four colleges supported entirely by the City of New York. The students didn't have to pay any tuition, and didn't even have to buy text books, which were available for loan. Again, to my surprise, I graduated from college.

After marrying and having a family I become active in the PTA and other civic affairs, and was later elected three times to the Palo Alto City Council.